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UNH Research Finds Shrinking Population in More Than a Third of Rural Counties

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UNH Research Finds Shrinking Population in More Than a Third of Rural Counties

Wednesday, February 6, 2019

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DURHAM, N.H.—Nearly 35 percent of rural counties in the United States are experiencing protracted and significant population loss, according to new research released by the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire. Those counties are now home to 6.2 million residents, a third fewer than lived there in 1950.

In all, the researchers found that 746 counties representing 24 percent of all U.S. counties are depopulating and 91 percent of them are rural. In contrast, just nine percent of urban counties are depopulating.

“Population loss from outmigration is the most important factor in the initial stages of depopulation,” the researchers said. “These depopulating rural counties had an average migration loss of 43 percent of their 20-to-24-year-olds in each decade from 1950 to 2010, and that chronic young adult outmigration means there were far fewer women of child-bearing age and, as a result, many fewer births. In addition, 60 percent of these counties had more deaths than births. This combination of young adult outmigration, fewer births and more deaths produced a downward spiral of population loss that will be difficult to break.”

Not all rural counties are depopulating. More than 35 percent of rural counties have experienced sustained growth for decades. Most growing counties are near metropolitan areas or centers for retirement and recreation. Yet, the researchers also found that even among the rural counties that were at their population peak in 2010, just 56 percent gained population between 2010 and 2016. “That nearly half of the counties with long histories of population gain are now losing population underscores the demographic and economic headwinds that non-metropolitan America faces.”

“This study provides a demographic window to the future and a sober forecast of continuing rural population decline in many economically depressed regions,” the researchers said. “Future rural population growth and decline clearly are deeply rooted in evolving patterns of migration, fertility and mortality. It is past time to refocus our attention on the rural people and places left behind.”

The full report can be found here: <https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/rural-depopulation> (<https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/rural-depopulation>). The research was conducted by Kenneth Johnson, senior demographer at Carsey and professor of sociology, and Daniel Lichter, a policy fellow at Carsey. It was funded by the Carnegie Corporation and NH Agriculture Experiment Station in support of Hatch Multi-State Regional Project W-4001.



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